



Vincentiana

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Volume 43  
Number 4 Vol. 43, No. 4-5

Article 8

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7-1999

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### Recommended Citation

Danjou, Yves C.M. (1999) "Saint Vincent and Islam," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 43 : No. 4 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol43/iss4/8>

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## Saint Vincent and Islam

By Yves Danjou, C.M.  
Province of Paris

In St. Vincent's time Islam was both a far-off, and a near at hand, reality.<sup>1</sup> For centuries Muslim forces had been taking over the Mediterranean basin and threatening the whole of Christian Europe. The seizure of the island of Chios in 1566 by the Turks, and a few years later their capture of Cyprus, was still fresh in people's minds. People often referred to the victory of Lepanto, October 7, 1571, to show that the Muslim forces were not invincible. In his letter to Firmin Get, Superior at Marseilles, Saint Vincent wrote: "*Thank you for the great news you gave me of the naval victory of the Venetians and the Order of Malta over the Turks.* (This was the battle that took place at the entrance to the Dardanelles on June 23, 1656). "*O Mon Dieu, Monsieur, what a motive for praising God for such a prodigious victory, surpassing even that of Lepanto.*"<sup>2</sup> (VI, 61-62).

### The importance of Islam in the time of St. Vincent

The problem of Islam is more or less overshadowed by the spread of Protestantism which seems all the more dangerous because at that time it was regarded as a perversion of Christianity coming from within that religion itself. Yet in spite of everything, in St. Vincent's time, the Muslim thrust is still on the agenda. When Corneille, in 1636-1637 puts on his tragedy "Le Cid", the spectators hardly need to have the history of the Reconquest of Spain explained to them. From time to time the idea of a Crusade against the Turks is proposed again. Father Joseph, the unofficial influential figure behind Cardinal Richelieu, praises the holy war against Islam in his 4, 037 line poem "La Turclade" written in Latin. Together with Prince Charles of Gonzague-Nevers, he establishes the "Christian militia" which recruits volunteers from the nobility of all Europe with the aim of reconquering the Ottoman Empire. In 1626 the *parlement* of Provence reminds the king who is a fervent Christian, that the Mediterranean brought him "the most salutary gift" he could ever receive: "That sea, Sire, made you a Christian. Make it Christian once again." In his political testament Richelieu recommends the building of a fleet of galleys, not only for the purpose of standing up to Spain but also to overawe the Grand Sultan.

The Turkish threat is an every day reality, at least in those regions bordering the Mediterranean. St. Vincent is not mistaken when he speaks about "*the Turkish brigantines that lie in wait in the Gulf of Lyons to catch the ships coming from*

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<sup>1</sup> This text is taken in part from my article with the same title, published in the "Bulletin of the Vincentians in France", n°98, February 1985

<sup>2</sup> The references in this text are taken from P. Coste, *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* – 14 Volumes, Paris, 1920--1925

*Beaucaire*". (1,4). Nobody is safe from this danger, neither the Knights of Malta (VII, 87), nor the servants of the household of Cardinal Antonio Barberini (V,31). St. Vincent speaks about the dangers facing some confreres as they travel by ship from Marseilles to Genoa and to Rome, dangers that come "*from the Turkish expeditions in those seas.*" (XII, 67). Jean Barreau, in Algiers, conjures up the same danger when he writes on June 5, 1655: "*never have so much violence and insolence been witnessed as at present. The Algerians are relying on thirty-six to forty ships that they have under their control, manifesting a general contempt for all the Christians in the world, except for the English, who have shown them that they have just as many and more powerful ships.*" (VIII, 536).

When we read St. Vincent we are amazed at the number of slaves and the wide variety of places they come from. They are from Cape Breton, Agde, Boulogne, the Basque region and Paris ( V, 3,1); from Le Havre, Nancy, Nogent-Sur-Seine, Saint –Jean-de Luz (VII, 182-183); from Dieppe, Amiens....(VIII,540)..We can understand St. Vincent's concern: "*God grant*", he writes to Jean Barreau, "*that the Turks may stop capturing so many prisoners.*" (V, 3,1). The Turks are organised and they know where to find the best prey. They are supplied with good information from renegades and unscrupulous traders; they have their tactics and when they set off for a raid they leave so suddenly that no foreigner can possibly know where they are heading. Jean Barreau apologises for the delay in sending his letter of June 5, 1655, a delay caused by two ships , ready for Leghorn, "*being delayed because of the galleys that left yesterday to go privateering.*" (VIII, 535).

## **Relations with Islamic countries**

It is true that the whole of Christianity trembles at the threat posed by the Turks. However, this does not prevent many political, economic and even social contacts continuing with Islamic countries. France has firm relations with the Ottoman Empire after the concessions made in 1535 between Francis I and Suliman the Magnificent led to the setting up in Paris of the Royal College, later to become the College of France, where Arabic, Hebrew and Turkish were taught. These concessions were renegotiated some years later. St. Vincent refers to them in his letter to Jean Barreau in 1651, explaining the efforts he is making to have him set free after his unjustifiable arrest in Algiers: "*It has finally been decided*", he tells him, "*to write to Constantinople, and the King will register a complaint with the Porte [the French referred to the Turkish government as the Sublime Porte] about your imprisonment, asking that the articles of peace and alliance agreed upon by Henry IV and the Grand Turk in the year 1604 be put into effect. When this is done, the Turks will have to stop their raids on the French and give back the slaves they have*". (IV, 140).

St. Vincent is even more explicit in the petition he addresses to Jean de la Haye –Vantelay, the French ambassador in Constantinople, asking him to recognise Martin Housson as consul in Tunis: *“I beg you to accept it, and also, My Lord, to be allowed to add my own very humble supplication to the letter which the King has written to you, asking you to use your good offices with the Grand Turk, and that you may be pleased to grant M. Husson, Consul for the French nation at Tunis, an authentic declaration ordaining that, in conformity with the provisions of the former capitulations agreed upon by our Kings and His Highness, the following nations pay without objection the consular duties to the said consul of France and his successors. These are: the French, Venetians, Spanish, inhabitants of Leghorn, Italians, Genoese, Sicilians and all Greeks – both those subject to His Highness and the others – Flemish, Dutch, Germans, Swedes, Jews, and, in general, all those, regardless of nationality (except for the English), who trade or will trade with Tunis.....and all the other ports, harbours, and beaches of the said kingdom of Tunis.”* (V, 82-83). This text shows that St. Vincent is well informed about the range of privileges granted by the concessions.

### **Information about Islam**

Moreover, the Arabic language is not unknown in the West and this makes for better relations with Islam. In 1584, the final year of the Pontificate of Gregory XIII who had a very open attitude to Christians in the east, Cardinal Ferdinand de Medici set up in Rome an important printing press that had a range of Oriental characters. Its first important publication is an edition of the Bible in Latin and Arabic, printed in 1591. At this time biblical scholars use Arabic to improve their knowledge of Hebrew. Some of them even believe that the Arabic versions of the Bible come from Syriac texts (Syriac is easily confused with Armenian) that predate the Greek manuscripts used by St. Jerome.

This explains why Francois Du Coudray who was sent to Rome to study Semitic languages wishes to translate the Syriac bible into Latin. St. Vincent tries to dissuade him from doing this and writes to him saying: *“You have spent three or four years learning Hebrew and you know it well enough to be able to uphold the cause of the Son of God in His own language and confound His enemies in that kingdom.”* (I, 251-252). Du Coudray must also have had quite a good knowledge of Arabic, and this, together with his knowledge of Italian, accounts for his success with the Turks when he gave missions to the galley slaves from Marseilles. For this reason, too, in 1649 St. Vincent wishes to send him to Algiers to negotiate the release of 80 Christian captives (II, 317, 368) but he is not able to leave for that country (II, 423).

It is in Paris that the best Arabic scholar of that time, the Dutchman Thomas Erpenius, learns Arabic and this enables him, in 1613, to publish a grammar in Arabic that was to be unequalled for two centuries. In 1647 Paris saw the first

translation of the Koran into French, “The Koran of Mohammed translated from Arabic into French” by Andre du Ryer. In 1630 this man was appointed royal translator in oriental languages after being French consul in Alexandria and in Cairo.

So the Islamic religion is not unknown to eastern Christians. In his book “Pensees” that he began to write after 1653, Pascal takes pains to challenge the value of the Koran and to question the credibility of Mohammed.<sup>3</sup> In Madagascar, Charles Nacquart uses his catechism that was published in Paris in 1657 under the title “Petit Catechisme”, to teach the morning and night prayers used by the Missionaries in instructing the Neophytes and the Catechumens in the island of Madagascar, a book written entirely in French and Malagasy. This book which contains thirty instructions uses phrases from the Arabic Koran to translate certain religious terms into Malagasy.<sup>4</sup> As for St. Vincent, he is deeply moved by the spectacular conversions of Muslims that he witnessed in Rome as a young man. On February 28, 1608, he writes to his patron, Monsieur de Comet: “*There is nothing new that I can write to you about except for the conversion of three Tartar families who came to this city to become Christians – His Holiness received them with tears in his eyes.*” (1, 17).

### **St. Vincent’s interest in countries dominated by Islam**

St. Vincent’s interest in these Islamic countries may perhaps date from the time of his captivity in N. Africa between the years 1605 and 1607. A few years ago it was considered smart to question whether this event actually took place, either in order to emphasise the mentality of this young man from the Landes who was looking for ways to improve his social status, or else to underline the importance of his spiritual transformation after 1611.<sup>5</sup> It is true that some people find this episode puzzling. St. Vincent’s secretary, Brother Ducourneau, says he knows absolutely nothing about it. (VIII, 5.13).

In our times, however, several writers recognise that St. Vincent’s captivity in Tunis and his escape to Aigues-Mortes are a distinct possibility.<sup>6</sup> We have to remember that this is not simply an account given in passing. Young Vincent wrote

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<sup>3</sup> Pascal, “Oeuvres completes”, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, Gallimard, 1954, pp 1192-1193

<sup>4</sup> L. Chierotti, “Il catechismo malgascio del 1657”, Vincentiana, n° 3, 1990, p.326

<sup>5</sup> One of the first writers to question the reality of St. Vincent’s captivity is A. Redier, “The true life of St. Vincent de Paul”, Paris, 1927. His thesis is taken up and developed by P. Grandchamp, “The feigned captivity of St. Vincent de Paul in Tunis,” partly printed in Tunis, 1928-1929, and reedited in 1965 in the Chronicles of Tunisia.

<sup>6</sup> After the example of G. Turbet-Delof who refuted Grandchamp’s arguments in his article, “Was St. Vincent de Paul a captive in Tunis?”, Revue d’Histoire de l’Eglise de France, Vol. VII, n° 161, July-December 1972, p. 331-340, we quote the following texts; P. Miquel, “Vincent de Paul”, Fayard, 1996. B. Pujot, “Vincent de Paul, le precurseur”, Albin Michel, 1998. R. Wulfman, “Charite publique et finances privees: Monsieur Vincent, gestionnaire et saint”, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998. B. Koch, “Saint Vincent, expert en procedure”, Bulletin des Lazaristes de France, n° 168, April 1999, p. 93-110.

several letters on this topic (1, 1 to 17). Besides, even if his captivity is not historically true, we can only be amazed at the choice of such an account to explain an absence lasting two years. He could easily have thought up some other excuse like that of a long illness. St. Vincent speaks about Barbary because this place has a special appeal for him. His interest in the place will increase when he is appointed Chaplain General to the Galleys in 1619. Tradition has it that when he returns to Marseilles for the first time in that capacity, he is received by the White Penitents of the Holy Trinity, established in Marseilles in 1306 by the Trinitarians, and whose members are committed to contributing alms to the redemption of captives.<sup>7</sup>

Islamic countries will always be of interest to St. Vincent de Paul. His first missionary project to a foreign country will be to Constantinople, the centre of the Ottoman Empire, just one year after the Congregation of the Mission was definitively approved by Pope Urban VIII. On July 25, 1634, he writes: *"The Ambassador to Turkey did me the honour of writing to me, calling for priests from Saint-Nicolas and from the Mission. He thinks they will be able to do more there than I would dare to tell you."* (I, 253). The ambassador in question is Henri de Gournay, Count de Marcheville, who has just had two chapels built within the embassy compound. Through the vindictiveness of the kapudan pasha or Lord High Admiral of the Turkish fleet, he is forced to destroy one of them before his expulsion in May 1634.<sup>8</sup>

### **St. Vincent's intentions**

St. Vincent even has long-term projects in mind for in this same letter to M. Du Coudray in Rome, he adds: *"Bring with you, please, ...that good young Maronite if you think he wishes to give himself to God in this Little Company. And please practise speaking modern Greek with him on the way so that you may teach it here if necessary: who knows?"* So St. Vincent already has plans for evangelisation in countries subject to Islam. His desire that modern Greek should be taught is an indication of the importance he attached to studying languages. (V, 228, 358-359; XII, 26-29 and particularly 66-67).

His interest in the Near East is shown on several occasions. In 1649 he mediates with Jacques Charon, penitentiary of Paris and a member of the Council of Conscience, in finding a compromise in the problem between the Franciscans and the Capuchins with regard to the consular chapel in Saida, which the Capuchins want to make into a parish. The meeting is held at Saint-Lazare on January 8, 1649, and a concordat is signed between the Roman Priests of Saint-Brieuc and Ambrose d'Auray on the one hand, and Joseph de Sainte-Marie, Procurator of the Holy Land, on the other. The Capuchins agree to give up their rights over the chapel while the Franciscans promise not to make difficulties over their present possession of it."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> H. Simard, "Saint Vincent de Paul et ses oeuvres a Marseille", Lyon, Vitte, 1894, p. 19

<sup>8</sup> R. Mantran, "Istanbul dans la seconde moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle", Maisonneuve, 1962, p.553-554

<sup>9</sup> G. de Vaumas, "L'éveil missionnaire de la France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle", Bloud et Gay, 1959, p.330

In 1658, again it is St. Vincent that the Capuchin, Fr. Sylvestre approaches, to ask for financial aid for Lebanon. He wants, in fact, to nominate Sheikh Abou-Naufal as Governor of Lebanon. He will have to pay out a lot in bribes and so needs 12,000 ecus. St. Vincent is very familiar with this procedure which has its advantages but also its dangers. He is not ready to forget the public humiliations suffered by Brother Barreau, consul in Algiers, the last occasion for these being only six months previously.(VII, 116).

He voices his doubts about the usefulness of such a procedure and writes: *"There would be reason to fear that the new Governor might not be supported for long, either because he might not be to the liking of the Turks or because the Grand Vizier is changed frequently, causing instability in the offices and the duties he assigns. What so often happens is that what one person does, his successor cancels. For these reasons, considerable expense would be incurred but without much success."* (VII, 326). In spite of his misgivings, St. Vincent does advance him a small sum. Unfortunately this is not enough to satisfy Fr. Sylvestre who consoles himself by getting Louis XIV to nominate Abou-Naufal as consul in Beirut in 1663.

### **St. Vincent's special concern**

However, it is the countries of North Africa, known as Barbary, that have the strongest appeal for Saint Vincent. As Chaplain General of the Galleys he has first-hand knowledge of the wretched state of most of the prisoners in the galley crews, whether these men be prisoners condemned by the law or Muslims reduced to slavery. His concerned gaze reaches out beyond France to the prisons of Algeria. He thinks of starting up some kind of mission there, under the pretext of ransoming captives and even of founding "a sort of hospital for the galley slaves which would justify our living there."(II, 369). While waiting for this project to be realised, he invites his confreres to give missions on the galleys at Marseilles. These missions are remarkably successful; ten Turks are baptised with great ceremony. (II,398).

As a result, the Duchess d'Aiguillon, niece of Cardinal Richelieu who made the de Gondi family relinquish the post of General of the Galleys, makes St. Vincent decide to make a foundation in Marseilles, on July 25, 1653. This house will have four missionaries who will look after the prisoners but they will also go to Barbary "whenever they think the time is right." (XIII, 300).<sup>10</sup> In order to promote such an enterprise she buys the consulate in Algiers and then the one in Tunis, so that the missionaries will find it easier to establish themselves in those places.

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<sup>10</sup> In 1649, St. Vincent will explain the strategic importance of this house in Marseilles: *"It is on our route and is half way on the journey to Rome: it is a seaport where we can embark for Italy and the Levant, a very convenient departure point for the Company. The missionaries there are concerned with the relief and the salvation of the poor prisoners, both the sick and the healthy ones, and look after the affairs of the Barbary captives."* (XII, 149)

In a letter written on February 25, 1654, Saint Vincent explains to the Ambassador in Turkey, Monsieur de la Haye-Vantelay, the aim of this operation.: *"We committed ourselves six or seven years ago to assist poor Christian slaves in Barbary spiritually and corporally, in sickness and in health. For this purpose we have sent there several of our confreres, who strive to encourage them to persevere in our holy religion, endure their captivity for the love of God and work out their salvation in the midst of the trials they are undergoing.....To facilitate this good work, they had to be placed in the beginning with the Consuls as their chaplains for fear that the Turks might not allow them to practise our holy religion."* (V, 84)

### **A wide range of projects**

If it turns out that the consular posts in Algiers and Tunis are the only ones that are actually created, St. Vincent still has very many projects in mind for missions in Islamic countries. At Sale, that infamous hotbed of corsairs not far from Rabat in Morocco,<sup>11</sup> and peopled mostly by Moors who were expelled from Spain in 1610, the French consul asks for a missionary to be sent. St. Vincent sends Jacques Le Soudier but the missionary gets no further than Marseilles because he is ousted by a Recollect Father. (III, 35, 69, 72, 81-82)

Later on, St. Vincent is asked by Propaganda Fide to send a missionary to Persia. Discussions go on from 1643 (II, 413-415) to 1648 (III, 380) without any concrete results, in spite of the goodwill of St. Vincent who is ready to make the greatest sacrifices for the project. In March 1647, he has no hesitation in proposing his assistant, Lambert aux Couteaux as candidate for the bishopric in Babylon: *"I must confess, Excellency"*, he writes to Bishop Ingoli, secretary of Propaganda Fide, *"that losing this person is like plucking out one of my own eyes or cutting off my arm."* (III, 158).

Throughout 1648, St. Vincent himself is thinking of sending missionaries to Arabia. In his petition to Propaganda Fide he explains: *"Since the three parts of Arabia known as Arabia Felix, Arabia Petrea and Arabia Deserta have not yet been assigned to any religious Order or secular priests, to be evangelised and led to the Christian faith, Vincent Depaul, Superior of the Congregation of the Mission, offers to send several of his priests to these parts of Arabia."* (III, 336). Later on, in 1656, he is asked by Propaganda to send a priest to Lebanon. (VI, 19). He thinks of sending Edme Jolly but finally decides on Thomas Berthe *"who, it is true, is not as learned"* but has shown that *"he is very prudent and pious."* (VI, 24). This plan will come to nothing. Indeed, at this very time, the Jesuits are settling in Mount Lebanon, at Antora, having been invited there by Sheikh Abou-Naufal el-Khazen.

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<sup>11</sup> These pirates do not hesitate to go on raiding expeditions even as far away as Iceland. In 1627 they pillage the town of Reykjavik (cf. Bartolome et Lucile Ba-ennassar, "Les chretiens d'Allah. L'histoire extraordinaire des renegats, XVI et XVII siecles", Perrin, 1989, p. 397 ff)



By a curious twist in history, the Lazarists will replace the Jesuits in 1783 and build Saint Joseph's College there.

### **Mission in the Islamic countries**

So we have to recognise that prior to the great mission to Madagascar which will start in 1648, almost all St. Vincent's missionary projects were directed to Islamic countries. How can we do otherwise than speak of his special interest in everything connected with Islam? Abelly, the first biographer of St. Vincent, is on the right track when, after sketching the missionary portrait of the saint, he speaks about the foreign missions that Vincent organised and he starts with the missions in Barbary.<sup>12</sup>

St. Vincent has always considered these missions to be the natural extension of the missions in France. The Rules of the Congregation of the Mission do not deal specifically with the question of foreign missions but state that the aim of the Congregation is "*to preach the gospel to the poor, especially those in country places.*" But St. Vincent is at pains to interpret this for his community. After 1658, the conferences that he gives are meant to explain these Rules. In a conference on the aim of the Company, given on December 6, 1658, St. Vincent eloquently shows that the service of the poor embraces all missions, even those in the most distant places. "*There will be some who argue against these works, you can be sure, and others will say that we are taking on too much by undertaking to send missionaries to far-off countries, to the Indies and to Barbary....It doesn't matter, our vocation is: Evangelizare pauperibus*". (XII, 90). These words are spoken from the heart, so much so that he returns to the subject and passionately condemns in advance those who lack this missionary spirit. "*If it should happen that later on some people were to suggest that we give up this practice, that we abandon this hospital, that we bring back those working in Barbary, that we should stay here and not go to that particular place, that we should abandon this employment and not hasten to relieve the needs of people in far-off places....*at this point St. Vincent is so overcome with emotion that he bursts out: "*such people are libertines, libertines, who seek nothing but their own pleasure and provided they have enough to eat they are not bothered about anything else.*" (XII, 92).

Moreover, notwithstanding many external pressures, and in spite of the insistent demands of some of his confreres, in spite of financial losses and losing personnel, in spite of humiliations of every kind and some moments of discouragement (for example, VI, 331 and VII, 230), St. Vincent will refuse to call a halt to the missions in Barbary. And he does not fail to rekindle the missionaries' zeal saying: "*Who would not offer to go to Madagascar, to Barbary, to Poland, or*

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<sup>12</sup> P. Coste, on the other hand, in his biography "Le grand saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent", Desclee de Brouwer, 1931, 3 vol. deals with the mission to Barbary as just one more work in the catalogue of relief given to mendicants, prisoners and galley slaves.

*to any other place where God wishes to be served by the Company?"* (XII, 241 or XI, 411).

### **St. Vincent's consideration for Muslims**

St. Vincent has some knowledge of Islam and he respects this religion. When speaking about the Turks he does not, as a rule, use derogatory terms. Yet this is an age where the worst insult you can offer someone is to call him a Turk and we see this in the list of epithets used by Sganarelle in Moliere's play *Don Juan*: "*the greatest scoundrel, a madman, a dog, a devil, a Turk!*"

In spite of the terrible ordeals that Jean Barreau or Philippe Le Vacher have to suffer at the hands of the Turks, St. Vincent never speaks of the latter in derogatory terms. He even goes so far as to recognise that the public humiliations heaped on these missionaries were often caused by a lack of prudence on the part of his confreres. On June 22, 1657, he writes: "*The Consul in Tunis (Martin Husson) has been sent back to France by the Dey and the Consul in Algiers (Jean Barreau) has been sent to prison by the public administration, unjustly but not without cause.*" (VI, 330). He recognises how difficult it is to avoid such harassment which comes from the corruption and the fickleness of the people in charge of such places, and he writes to Brother Barreau: "*The restoration of the former Pasha will make you understandably afraid that he will treat you as harshly as he did before and the various trials you are suffering at present will eventually overwhelm you. I tell you that I am deeply grieved at all the ordeals that have come your way and the fact that I cannot see how to relieve your suffering unless Providence helps you in some extraordinary way.*" (VI, 7).

Some writers go so far as to say that if St. Vincent never speaks about his captivity, and if in 1660 he tries to destroy the letters that mention it, this is because the letters describe his captivity in terms that are rather benign and anodyne. In 1660 it is not the time to talk like this about his captivity because preparations are now in hand for an expedition to liberate the wretched captives in Algiers. St. Vincent gives his complete support to this armed expedition against the Turks. He rejoices "*at Commander Paul's proposal to go to Algiers and obtain justice from the Turks.*" (VII, 78). The final clause is a good indication of his feelings on the matter. It is not a question of organising a new Crusade but of seeing that the established conventions are better respected and that the captives are freed. At this time relations between France and the countries dependent on the Grand Porte are at a low ebb. Mention is made of "*the imprisonment of the Ambassador to Constantinople and the ill treatment handed out to the Consuls of Alexandria, Alep and Tripoli by the Turks.*" (VII, 259). At the same time St. Vincent writes to Philippe Le Vacher in Marseilles, expressing his anguish: "*You do not mention anything about Algiers or Tunis; is there no word of them in Marseilles? O God,*

*protect our poor confreres. I beg you, Monsieur, to send me news if you have any.*" (VII, 396)

### **His knowledge of Islam**

St. Vincent's precise and sometimes profound knowledge of Islam is astonishing. It is true that he has his sources of information. The missionaries in Algeria and Tunis keep up a regular correspondence with him. At that time the local Superiors used to write to their Superior General nearly every week. (II, 236, 452; VII, 249, 504...). Packets of letters arrive at Saint-Lazare. (V, 135). People do not hesitate to resort to various strategies and to send letters by different means in order to overcome the difficulties inherent in sending them. The reports that are sent are detailed and often they are quite long. St. Vincent is so prudent that he sometimes advises people to send letters in code. He says to Jean Barreau: *"It would be good for us to use a code; I will send you one if you know how to use it."* (III, 43).

St. Vincent does not lack explanations or clarifications on points of the Islamic faith. He knows from a letter sent by Julien Guerin in Tunis, the reply given by a Turk who had witnessed a dispute among Christians: *"Father, we Turks are not allowed to live for three days in disagreement with our neighbour."* (III, 25). As well as this, he had numerous close contacts with former captives. Some of these, like Guillaume Servin and Rene Duchesne, were ransomed by Jean Barreau and afterwards entered the Company as Coadjutor brothers. (XI, 189, 203).

That is why St. Vincent is so well-informed about Muslim customs and he knows how difficult it is for a Muslim to be converted because he risks: *"being burnt alive because this is what happens in these countries."* (XI, 307). He knows that Turks, in common with Indians and Jews never go bareheaded, even when greeting one another. (XI, 273). He knows that people can be condemned as a result of publicly spread rumour. When he wishes to persuade the Ladies of Charity to look after the foundlings, some of whom are sold by unscrupulous persons, he says: *"It is a scandal in Paris that we blame the Turks for selling men like animals."* (XIII, 775).

### **His esteem for certain Muslim practices**

Strangely enough, St. Vincent does not shy away from using some Muslim customs as examples to be followed by the Daughters of Charity and his own confreres. He has no hesitation in saying: *"The Turks are better people than many Christians."* (X, 470). When speaking of our duty to practise reconciliation he recalls the conversation mentioned above which took place between Julien Guerin and a Turk who declared: *"Oh, we act in a very different manner because we never*

*let the sun go down on our anger.” And St. Vincent concluded: “That is what the Turks do. And so a Daughter of Charity who cherishes a certain coldness in her heart towards her neighbour and who does not go to the trouble of being reconciled is worse than the Turks.” (X, 470).*

Some months later, on November 15, 1657, he used the example of the Turks to persuade the Daughters of Charity not to drink wine “*except in the case of invalids or the very old.*” He said: “*Believe me, Sisters, it is a great advantage never to drink wine. The Turks never drink it, although they live in a very warm country and they are far healthier than people here who do, which shows that wine is not so necessary to life as people think. Ah! if it was not so common we should not see so much disorder. Isn’t it a great pity that the Turks, and all who live in Turkey, which has an area of ten thousand miles, the equivalent of one hundred and fifty of our leagues, live without wine and that Christians use it so excessively!*” (X, 360-361). And St. Vincent draws the following conclusion: “*And hence Turks are so composed in their manner that they cannot bear anyone who talks in a loud voice.*”

This last example was used almost two years earlier when St. Vincent was speaking to the Priests of the Mission during repetition of prayer: “*You see that in certain towns such as Constantinople, for example, there are police...to go round and check on those who speak too loudly and make too much noise...and if they find someone who gets carried away and speaks too loudly, there and then and without more ado they make him lie stretched out on the pavement and they beat him twenty or thirty times with their batons. Now these Turks act in this way purely out of fear of the police, with what more reason should we not act in this way out of virtue.*” (XI, 212). Presenting the Turks in this way is a far cry from the way Moliere was pleased to present them as buffoons at the end of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

### **Examples to be followed**

On occasions St. Vincent recognises the true value of charitable actions performed by non-Christians. He reminds the Daughters of Charity that the service of the poor has to extend to “spiritual assistance.” Indeed, there is nothing specifically Christian about giving corporal help. “*A Turk, an idolator, can give aid for the body. That is why Our Lord would not have instituted a Company solely for that, since natural considerations alone would oblige us to act in this way.*” (X, 334). He explains to the missionaries, too, that there is a natural wisdom that is universal: “*This does not mean to say that in the world there are not good sayings, adages that are not opposed to Christian maxims, as, for example, the saying: “Do good and you will find good”. That is true, the pagans and the Turks accept that and nobody would disagree.*” (XII, 273). On another occasion he agrees that it is a natural impulse to do good and help others: “*Even the Turks, who have no*

*knowledge of God, are obliged to act in this way and if I had no other knowledge I would be obliged by natural law to behave like this.” (X, 329).*

St. Vincent is even more daring when he uses the example of Muslims to urge the Sisters to say the rosary and he gives them this encouragement: “*Now if Turks have some sort of devotion to the Rosary, is it not reasonable that you should have a great devotion towards the Blessed Virgin?*” Before coming to that conclusion he explains how the Muslims say their rosary: “*The Turks, themselves, realised that this form of prayer is so beautiful that some of them wear a rosary round their neck and others wear it as a scarf. Oh! do you know how they say the Rosary? They do not say, as we do, the Pater and the Ave, because they do not believe in Our Lord and do not regard Him as their Lord, although they have a great respect for Him, for Him and for the Blessed Virgin, and have it to such a degree that if they hear anyone blaspheming against Our Lord they put him to death. So they take their beads and say: ‘Allah, Allah, my God, my God, have pity on me; just God, merciful God, almighty God.’ Those are the epithets they apply to Him.*”(X, 621).

Nobody could be more precise. St. Vincent understands the meaning of the word Allah. He knows that the Muslim rosary is made up of 99 beads, each one spelling out a name for God. The three invocations to God who is just, merciful and powerful are correctly described. More than that, he gives a very fair assessment of Muslim thinking about Jesus and the Virgin Mary in context. Muslims hold that Jesus was born of a Virgin in a miraculous way and they have such a respect for Him that they cannot accept the idea that He died the infamous death of the Cross. (Koran, IV, 157). As for Mary, she is the only woman whose name is cited in the Koran which describes her as ‘purified’ and ‘chosen.’” (Koran, III, 42).

### **Aim of the mission to Barbary**

His knowledge of the world of Islam only serves to make St. Vincent more aware of the conditions under which Christians in Islamic countries have to live. He concedes that “*the Turks think they are offering a sacrifice to God when they persecute them.*”(VII, 326) and he knows that the conversion of Christians to “*the religion of Mohammed serves to bolster the courage of the Turks*”.(V, 85). The aid that he wishes to bring to Barbary is both material and spiritual. It is not a question of competing with other Orders such as the Trinitarians and the Mercedarians who only ransom Christian captives. St. Vincent is very explicit about this when he is planning to send missionaries to Algiers. He will say it again some 15 years later during repetition of prayer when he makes reference to a religious Order whose work is the ransoming of captives. “*That is very good, it is excellent, but it seems to me that something more is offered by those who go to Algiers and to Tunis, not simply to ransom poor Christians but also to live there in order to redeem these*

*poor people, to assist them corporally and spiritually, to see to their needs and to be always there to help them.” (XI, 437).*

This is something he had already said in his recommendations to Boniface Nouelly and to Jean Barreau (XIII, 306-307), and in the rule of life he sent to Jean Le Vacher and Martin Husson before they left for Algiers (XIII, 363). St. Vincent keeps faith with his missionary vision. If we are to help the poor we must come close to them so that we can give them spiritual and material help in their misery. In Barbary it is a matter of helping the captives in their distress and strengthening their faith in spite of moral, psychological and even physical pressures to make them apostatise, and to bring them some hope by showing them they are not forgotten.

It is much to St. Vincent's credit that he was able to understand, as though from experience, the deep despair felt by these captives. Letters written by these captives would frequently go astray, either because of problems in delivering them (V, 526-527), or because their families did not want to receive them and for a variety of reasons were unwilling to follow them up. St. Vincent is very anxious that the captives should let people know about them and he assures them that their letters really will arrive at their destination. He often makes parish priests responsible for delivering the letters and for obliging the families to reply

St. Vincent does not fail to admire the faith of these captives and he frequently asks his missionaries to be less demanding with regard to the easy-going and even scandalous behaviour of some of them who cannot accept their misfortune. The recommendations he makes to Philippe Le Vacher, who is by nature a little too impetuous, are very clear on this point and they reveal a most uncommon knowledge of the state of captivity. *“Above all”, he writes to him, “you must not take it upon yourself to abolish too quickly the customs practised by the captives even if these are bad. I beseech you, therefore, to condescend as far as you can to human frailty; you will win over the slaves who are ecclesiastics more by sympathising with them than by rebukes and correction. It is not light but strength that they need.”* (IV, 121) On occasions St. Vincent praises some martyrs like young Pierre Borguny, a native of Majorca, who was burnt alive in Algiers for returning to the Christian faith. His body will be brought back to Paris in 1657 through the efforts of Philippe Le Vacher (V, 342). St. Vincent mentions him in his letters (V, 341) and in his conferences. (XI, 389-392).

## **Mission to the Muslims**

St. Vincent's missionary interest is not, however, limited to the captives. He also has the Muslim people in mind. It is true that he is extremely prudent and that he gives his missionaries precise instructions on this point: *“They will be subject”, he says, “to the laws of the country, except those that concern religion, on which subject let them never dispute or say anything in contempt of it.”* (XIII, 307, 364).

He calls to order Philippe Le Vacher who is sometimes inclined to be over zealous: *"You have another reef to avoid in your dealings with the Turks and renegades: in the name of Our Lord, have no communications with these people.....It is easier and more important to stop many slaves apostatising than to convert one single renegade. A doctor who preserves us from an illness is more meritorious than one who cures us of it."* (IV, 121-122).

St. Vincent is opposed to all extremes in preaching. However, the time is not far distant when certain missionaries, particularly some of the sons of St. Francis, will act rashly in their desire for martyrdom. In Constantinople, one such man was the Capuchin, St. Joseph of Leonessa, from the monastery of Saint-Benoit which is today occupied by the Lazarists. In 1587 he forces an entry into the seraglio in an attempt to convert the Sultan Murad III. Miraculously delivered from many forms of torture, he dies a peaceful death in Italy in 1612.<sup>13</sup> St. Vincent must have heard his confreres from the mission in Leonessa speak about this man. (VIII, 31, 127). Joseph de Leonessa was beatified in 1737, six days after the canonisation of St. Vincent.

Does this mean that St. Vincent is opposed to all missionary contact with the Muslim people? If he is against any direct religious contact this is not a matter of principle but of prudence. The mission to the poor slaves is not to be put in jeopardy for the sake of a few conversions that may not always be genuine. St. Vincent says as much to Philippe Le Vacher when he asks him to moderate his zeal.(IV, 121-123). However, if it sometimes happens that a person is converted, St. Vincent never criticises this even though unpleasant consequences may ensue, as in the case of the son of the Bey of Tunis. He writes to Antoine Portail: *"The work of Father Guerin, in Tunis, continues to be blessed. He has escaped from great danger following the conversion of the king's son who escaped with five or six others of his entourage and they made their way to Sicily where they were baptised. Poor Father Guerin was imprisoned for a month, on suspicion of having a hand in the affair and he expected to be taken away at any minute and burnt alive; something he was sure would happen."* (II, 622). St. Vincent simply recommends them to practise the utmost discretion and he gives his reasons for this in a letter to Jean Barreau in Algiers. He advises him *"never to write or to speak about conversions out there and, more importantly, to have nothing to do with conversions that are against the law in that country. You have reason to fear lest a person may feign conversion in order to stir up trouble."*(III, 42)

### **The universal dimension of the mission**

In St. Vincent's mind the mission is a unified whole. Evangelisation has to be addressed to Christians in order to strengthen their faith, and also to people who do not yet know about the Christian religion and call these to conversion. The

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<sup>13</sup> Article "Joseph de Leonessa" in the Encyclopedia of Catholicism, Volume IV, section 1002

missionaries in Barbary are to concern themselves with all people but they need to keep certain priorities in mind. Speaking about the Turks, St. Vincent refers to a report sent by “*a Priest of the Mission sent there for the conversion of the infidels.*” (X, 470). Nothing could be more explicit. He often uses the term “the poor” to include all those who need his ministry, whether they are Christians or not. “*The truth is*”, he writes to Etienne Blatiron, “*that they will do good among the poor and the captives in a foreign country if they are happy to do the same among the poor and afflicted here.*” (III, 337).

He says something similar to Jacques de La Fosse who has reservations about being responsible for the Daughters of Charity: “*The virtue of mercy is exercised in various ways and it has led the Company into different ways of serving the poor, witness the service it renders to the galley slaves and to the captives in Barbary.*” (VIII, 238) And when he speaks about “*the conversion of poor nations*” he is explicitly referring to the Indies, Japan and Barbary. (XI, 291).

St. Vincent’s interest in Islamic countries stems from the attraction that these places had for him personally, but there are also theological reasons for it and on several occasions he reminds others that the Pope “*has the power to send ecclesiastics to all parts of the world for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.*” (II, 51. See also III, 154, 158, 182; XI, 421). For him, the official recognition of the Congregation of the Mission by the Holy See, means they must have a worldwide vision of the mission. “*Our vocation*”, St. Vincent reminds his confreres, “*is not simply to go into a parish, or a diocese, but to go all over the world.*” (XII, 262).

He is preoccupied with the way that heresies, particularly the heresy of Protestantism are spreading, and he wonders, too, whether the future of Christianity does not lie with non-Christian countries. “*Who is to say,*” he confides to Jean Dehorgny, “*that God is not calling us to Persia? How do we know that God is not thinking of moving the Church itself to infidel countries where the people are perhaps more blameless than many Christians who possess nothing less than the sacred mysteries of our religion? I have had this feeling for a long time.*” (III, 153 and 154. Cf III, 35, and XI, 309).

### **St. Vincent’s pastoral theology**

St. Vincent’s desire for the Company to be missionary is supported and made explicit in his teaching that reflects this dimension. It has to be remembered that his pastoral theology is based on the mystery of the Incarnation. The first recommendation that he makes to the missionaries on their way to Tunis and to Algiers is related to this mystery: “*They should have a particular devotion to the*



*mystery of the Incarnation, by which Our Lord came down on earth to help us in the bondage we are kept captive in by the evil spirit.*" (XIII, 306). So it is only natural that their mission should be to bring spiritual and corporal relief to all Christian slaves. We see here St. Vincent's original intuition, which is that the best way to combat heresy in the country parts of France is to strengthen the faithful in the practice of their own religion. This requires prudence and patience. St. Vincent recommends Jean Barreau, *"to take every conceivable precaution so as not to give the Turks any reason for oppressing you."* (VI, 135).

On the other hand, the missionary must not feel that he is responsible for everything beyond his own zeal, and St. Vincent reminds Philippe Le Vacher that the reason he is being sent to Algiers to bring relief to the captives. He tells him, however, *"you are not, as you seem to think, responsible for their salvation"*. (IV, 120). He gives the same reassurance to Philippe's brother in Tunis: *"God does not ask you to do more than He gives you the means of doing."* (VII, 506). In other cases, if it is not possible to take any action or to be successful, he advises commending the enterprise to God. This is the advice he gives to Jean Barreau: *"We have to keep our souls in peace and adore God's power in our weakness."* (VI, 7). Or again: *"After you have done all in your power to prevent a Christian from going astray, you should seek consolation in Our Lord who could prevent this misfortune but it is not His will to do so."* (V, 31).

### **St. Vincent's missionary teaching**

This being said, it remains the goal of a missionary to convert all people to the Catholic faith. St. Vincent, therefore, in keeping with the thinking of St. Francis de Sales, recognises that not everyone shares the Christian religion, but he would refuse to impose this by force. A religion of love can only be spread by persuasion. Confronted from his earliest days with the tensions caused by Protestantism, he has a sense of religious pluralism and respect for people's conscience. That is why he asks his missionaries to avoid all polemics or any action that could be misinterpreted. His teaching on how they are to act is very clear. Let us recall his instructions to them: *"They will be subject to the laws of the country except those that concern religion; on which subject let them never dispute or say anything in contempt of it."* (XIII, 307). We could take as applying to the mission to Muslims, St. Vincent's words about Protestants: *"They should be mindful"*, he writes to the missionaries at Richelieu, *"that they are not sent there for the heretics, but for poor Catholics, and yet, if an opportunity comes their way to instruct a heretic, they should do so with meekness and humility, showing that their words spring from compassion and not indignation."* (I, 429).

St. Vincent speaks from experience. *"I have never seen, never known"*, he declares, *"any heretic who has been converted by force of argument or by subtle reasoning."* (XI, 66). The reason for this is that *"we do not believe a man because*

*he is learned but because we think he is good and we love him.*" (1, 295). That is why the primary evangelisation must be one of witness. The missionary can do a lot by doing the good work that is within his scope. St. Vincent believes in the importance of example. This is the foundation of his missionary theology that is firmly anchored in the Incarnation. We have to imitate Christ who *"began with actions and then proceeded to teach."* This maxim characterises the introduction to the Common Rules of the Priests of the Mission and constitutes their originality. Writing to Firmin Get, the Superior at Marseilles, who is beginning to have doubts about the value of the work in Barbary, St. Vincent says: *"Even if no other good were to come out of these situations than to reveal to that wretched land the beauty of our religion by sending there men who cross the seas, who willingly leave their own country and comforts and subject themselves to a thousand outrages for the consolation of their afflicted brothers, I feel that the men and the money would be well spent."*(VII, 117).

So every time that the good works done are recognised as such, St. Vincent is ever ready to rejoice: *"Our men in Barbary give such edification, by the grace of God, that the Pasha of Tripoli, in Barbary, is asking for someone to do as they do; he even offers to write to the King about it."* (V, 178). Or again, during a conference, he spoke about Jean le Vacher and said: *"When he returned to Tunis , the Dey declared that this man would go to heaven because of all the alms he bestowed...You see how he made even the infidels respect our religion."* (XI, 449). And he went on to say: *"This is what I was told by his brother, Fr. Philippe Le Vacher, who when he was asked how the Turks responded to our religion, said that they were too barbaric to appreciate spiritual things but he respected them for their external things and ceremonies, and he even went so far as to borrow their tapestries for our solemn ceremonies."* <sup>14</sup> (XI, 449).

The conclusion that St. Vincent draws is one that is still relevant today: *"Oh Saviour!"* he exclaims, *Oh Priests of the Mission! Oh all of us who are members of the Mission! we can do likewise and we can lead people to respect our holy faith by living according to God's will and imitating our good Fr. Le Vacher."* (XI, 449).

(Translator: Sr. Joyce Howard, D.C)

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<sup>14</sup> St. Vincent does well to recognise the importance of religious ceremonies and liturgical hymns as ways of expressing the Christian faith. He attributes his liberation from slavery in Tunis to *"some hymns of praise I sang in the presence"* one of the wives of his master. (I, 10). In our own times we know the profound effect that eastern liturgies with their chants and their ceremonial worship can have on some Muslims.